



Instead of answering he burst into a fit of laughter—loud, coarse, hard laughter, so utterly unlike any sound I had ever yet heard issue from his lips, so strangely and shockingly foreign to his character as I understood it, that I stood still on the sands, and openly remonstrated with him.  
(See page 303, col. 1.)

of a man. His smile is rare and sweet; his manner, perfectly quiet and retiring, has yet a latent persuasiveness in it, which is (to women) irresistibly winning. He just halts a little in his walk, from the effect of an injury received in past years, when he was a soldier serving in India, and he carries a thick bamboo cane, with a curious crutch handle, (an old favourite) to help himself along whenever he gets on his feet, indoors or out. With this one little drawback (if it is a drawback), there is nothing infirm or old or awkward about him; his slight limp when he walks has (perhaps to my partial eyes) a certain quaint grace of its own, which is pleasant to see than the unrestrained activity of other men. And last, and best of all, I love him! I love him! I love him! And there is an end of my portrait of my husband on our wedding day.

The glass has told me all I want to know. We leave the vestry at last.

The sky, cloudy since the morning, has darkened while we have been in the church, and the rain is beginning to fall heavily. The idlers outside stare at us grimly under their umbrellas as we pass through their ranks, and hasten into our carriage. No cheering; no sunshine; no flowers strewn in our path; no grand breakfast; no genial speeches, no bridesmaids; no father's or mother's blessing. A dreary wedding—there is no denying it—and (if Aunt Starkweather is right) a bad beginning as well!

A coupé has been reserved for us at the railway station. The attentive porter, on the lookout for his fee, pulls down the blinds over the side windows of the carriage, and shuts out all prying eyes in that way. After what seems to be an interminable delay the train starts. My husband winds his arm round me. "At last!" he whispers, with love in his eyes that no words

can utter, and presses me to him gently. My arm steals round his neck; my eyes answer his eyes. Our lips meet in the first long lingering kiss of our married life.

Oh, what recollections of that journey rise in me as I write! Let me dry my eyes, and shut up my paper for the day.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE BRIDE'S THOUGHTS.

We had been travelling for a little more than an hour, when a change passed insensibly over us both.

Still sitting close together, with my hand in his, with my head on his shoulder, little by little we fell insensibly into silence. Had we already exhausted the narrow yet eloquent vocabulary of love? Or had we determined by unexpressed consent, after enjoying the luxury of passion that speaks, to try the deeper and finer rapture passion that thinks? I can hardly determine; I only know that a time came when under some strange influence our lips were closed towards each other. We travelled along, each of us absorbed in our own reverie. Was he thinking exclusively of me—as I was thinking exclusively of him? Before the journey's end I had my doubts, at a little later time I knew for certain, that his thoughts, wandering far away from his young wife, were all turned inward on his own unhappy self.

For me, the secret pleasure of filling my mind while I felt him by my side, was a luxury in itself.

I pictured in my thoughts our first meeting in the neighbourhood of my uncle's house.

Our famous north-country trout-stream wound its flashing and foaming way through

a ravine in the rocky moorland. It was a windy, shadowy evening. A heavily clouded sunset lay low and red in the west. A solitary angler stood casting his fly, at a turn in the stream, where the backwater lay still and deep under an overhanging bank. A girl (myself) standing on the bank, invisible to the fisherman beneath, waited eagerly to see the trout rise.

The moment came; the fish took the fly.

Sometimes on the little level strip of sand at the feet of the bank; sometimes (when the stream turned again) in the shallower water rushing over its rocky bed, the angler followed the captured trout, now letting the line run out, and now winding it in again, in the difficult and delicate process of "playing" the fish. Along the bank I followed, to watch the contest of skill and cunning between the man and the trout. I had lived long enough with my Uncle Starkweather to catch some of his enthusiasm for field sports, and to learn something, especially, of the angler's art. Still following the stranger, with my eyes intently fixed on every movement of his rod and line, and with not so much as a chance fragment of my attention to spare for the rough path along which I was walking, I tripped by chance on the loose overhanging earth at the edge of the bank, and fell into the stream in an instant.

The distance was trifling; the water was shallow; the bed of the river was (fortunately for me) of sand. Beyond the fright and the wetting I had nothing to complain of. In a few moments I was out of the water and up again, very much ashamed of myself, on the firm ground. Short as the interval was, it proved long enough to favour the escape of the fish. The angler had heard my first instinctive cry of alarm, had turned, and had thrown aside his rod to help me. We confronted each other for

the first time, I on the bank and he in the shallow water below. Our eyes encountered, and I verily believe our hearts encountered at the same moment. This I know for certain, we forgot our breeding as lady and gentleman; we looked at each other in barbarous silence.

I was the first to recover myself. What did I say to him?

I said something about my not being hurt, and then something more, urging him to come back, and try if he might not yet recover the fish.

He went back unwillingly. He returned to me—of course, without the fish. Knowing how bitterly disappointed my uncle would have been in his place, I apologised very earnestly. In my eagerness to make atonement I even offered to show him a spot where he might try again, lower down the stream.

He would not hear of it; he entreated me to go home and change my wet dress. I cared nothing for the wetting, but I obeyed him without knowing why.

He walked with me. My way back to the vicarage was his way back to the inn. He had come to our party, he told me, for the quiet and retirement as much as for the fishing. He had noticed me once or twice from the window of his room at the inn. He asked if I was not the vicar's daughter.

I set him right. I told him that the vicar had married my mother's sister, and that the two had been father and mother to me since the death of my parents. He asked if he might venture to call on Doctor Starkweather the next day; mentioning the name of a friend of his with whom he believed the vicar to be acquainted. I invited him to visit us, as if it had been my house; I was spell-bound, under his eyes and under his voice. I had fancied, honestly fancied, myself to have been in love, often and often before this time. Never, in no other man's company, had I felt as I now felt in the presence of this man. Night seemed to fall suddenly over the evening landscape when he left me. I leaned against the Vicarage gate. I could not breathe, I could not think; my heart fluttered as if it would fly out of my bosom—and all this for a stranger! I burnt with shame; but oh, in spite of it all, I was so happy!

And now, when the little more than a few weeks had passed since that first meeting, I had him by my side; he was mine for life! I lifted my head from his bosom to look at him. I was like a child with a new toy—I wanted to make sure that he was really my own.

He never noticed the action: he never moved in his corner of the carriage. Was he deep in his own thoughts? and were they thoughts of me?

I laid down my head again softly, so as not to disturb him. My thoughts wandered backward once more, and showed me another picture in the golden gallery of the past.

The garden at the Vicarage formed the new scene. The time was night. We had met together in secret. We were walking slowly to and fro, out of sight of the house; now in the shadowy paths of the shrubbery, now in the lovely moonlight on the open lawn.

We had long since owned our love, and devoted our lives to each other. Already our interests were one; already we shared the pleasures and the pains of life. I had gone out to meet him that night with a heavy heart, to seek comfort in his presence, and to find encouragement in his voice. He noticed that I sighed when he first took me in his arms, and he gently turned my head towards the moonlight, to read my trouble in my face. How often he had read my happiness there in the earlier days of our love!

"You bring bad news, my angel," he said, lifting my hair tenderly from my forehead as he spoke. "I see the lines here which tell me of anxiety and distress. I almost wish I loved you less dearly, Valeria."

"Why?"

"I might give you back your freedom. I have only to leave this place, and your uncle would be satisfied, and you would be relieved from all the cares that are pressing on you now."

"Don't speak of it, Eustace! If you want me to forget my cares say you love me more dearly than ever."

He said it in a kiss. We had a moment of exquisite forgetfulness of the hard ways of life—a moment of delicious absorption in each other. I came back to realities, fortified and composed, rewarded for all that I had gone through, ready to go through it all over again for another kiss. Only give a woman love, and there is nothing she will not venture, suffer, and do.

"Have they been raising fresh objections to our marriage?" he asked, as we slowly walked on again.

"No; they have done with objecting. They have remembered at last that I am of age, and that I can choose for myself. They have been pleading with me, Eustace, to give you up. My aunt, whom I thought rather a hard woman, has been crying—for the first time in my experience of her. My uncle, always kind and good to me, has been kinder and better than ever. He has told me that if I persist in becoming your wife I shall not be deserted on my wedding day. Wherever we may marry he will be there to read the service, and my aunt will go to the church with me. But he entreats me to consider seriously what I am doing—to consent to a separation from you for a time—to consult other people on my position towards you, if I am not satisfied with his opinion. Oh, my darling, they are as anxious to part us, as if you were the worst, instead of the best of men!"

"Has anything happened since yesterday to increase their distrust of me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You remember referring my uncle to a friend of yours and of his?"

"Yes. To Major Fitz-David."

"My uncle has written to Major Fitz-David."